

Barth Society program set for AAR/SBL meeting in Nashville, November 17-18

November 17-18 will see two sessions sponsored by the Karl Barth Society of North America in conjunction with the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature in Nashville. The first session will be on Friday afternoon with a second session on Saturday morning.

INVITATION TO MEMBERSHIP IN THE KARL BARTH SOCIETY

All who are interested are invited to join the Karl Barth Society of North America.

To become a member of the Barth Society, send your name, address, and annual dues of \$15.00 (\$10.00 for students) to:

Professor Russell Palmer
Dept. of Philosophy and Religion
University of Nebraska at Omaha
Omaha, NE 68182-0265

Checks (drawn on a U. S. bank) should be made payable to "Karl Barth Society." Members whose dues were last paid prior to November of last year are encouraged to send in their annual renewal.

The Friday session will be held from 3:45 to 6:15 p.m. in Bayou Room B in the Opryland Hotel, with Walter Lowe (Emory University) presiding. John Milbank (University of Virginia) will speak on "Radical Orthodoxy: Why Radical? Why Orthodox?" Respondents will be Joseph Mangina (Wycliffe College, Toronto) and Fritz Bauerschmidt (Loyola College in Maryland).

Readers interested in gaining some orientation to the work of John Milbank and his colleagues in the "Radical Orthodoxy" movement are directed to a sympathetic yet critical article by R. R. Reno (Creighton University) in *First Things* (February 2000, pp. 37-44). The article, "The Radical Orthodoxy Project," is available online at < www.firstthings.com > (under search, type in "radical+orthodoxy" and this article is the first thing that comes up).

Milbank is known for his *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Blackwell, 1993) and *The Word Made Strange* (Blackwell, 1997). Recently he, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward have joined to edit *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (Routledge, 1999).

The Saturday session will meet from 9:00 to 11:30 a.m. in Bayou Room D of the Opryland Hotel. The session will be devoted to Bruce Marshall's *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge University Press). Marshall (St. Olaf College) will present a summary of his new book, with responses by John Webster (Oxford University) and James J. Buckley (Loyola College in Maryland). George Hunsinger (Center for Barth Studies, Princeton Seminary) will preside.

Jesus Christ: the Same, Yesterday, Today and Forever

One of the highlights of last summer's conference at Luther Seminary in St. Paul on the legacy of Barth and Bonhoeffer (July 2000) was an address by Kate Sonderegger. A revised version of this paper is scheduled for publication in a forthcoming issue of the *Toronto Journal of Theology*, but we believe readers of this Newsletter would appreciate seeing her comments in full.

KATHERINE SONDEREGGER
(Middlebury College)

I turn 50 this summer, and I've been in a rather reflective frame of mind. It's been nearly 30 years since I first started reading Barth, and I have begun to reflect on Barth's significance in new ways. The old ways remain, of course: After many years, I still

respect his rigor, his precision, his sheer mastery and elegance; in fact, more each time I study him. It's not news, I imagine, to all of you friends of Barth and Bonhoeffer that Karl Barth is a great dogmatic theologian; but I really mean more than that. Unlike so many of our cultural leaders, these days and I suppose in any day, Barth's work does not become dated, or threadbare with study, but rather remains

fresh; indeed grows in power as the others against whom we used to measure him quietly recede into the past. He is a true doctor of the Church, and like all doctors, confessors, and martyrs, Barth teaches us still. But as I have reflected on this wonderful achievement of Barth's, I am struck by how little I understood it when I first started reading the *Church Dogmatics*.

True enough, I did not understand Barth's *theology* properly when I first set out. It *sounds* so simple, so straightforward, almost hypnotically repetitive, that anyone could master it: find the key, I thought, and all doors unlock. As you can see I began where many others did—that Barth was a theologian of this strange condition we called, "Christomonism", and all doctrine was a sometimes natural, sometimes forced application of that single note. How wrong I was! I have been taught by these years of reading Barth now to see things more clearly: Barth's freshness, dogmatic innovation, and philosophical sophistication impresses me at every turn, and puts to rest the idea that the *Church Dogmatics* is the procrustean bed of doctrine. But I think I misunderstood Barth in another, less doctrinal way, as well.

I used to think of Barth as what I might call a "theological titan." That is, I unwittingly applied the categories Barth assigned to the proud sinner to his own achievement as a theologian. Titanism Barth often depicted as the Prometheus of modern life: proud, yes, but also solitary, tragically heroic, forging great work against all odds and at his own will, moving others toward himself. My early appreciation of Barth sadly mimicked this portrait of the Romantic hero. I thought Barth the solitary genius, the man who single-handedly over-turned the errors of the past, who swam 'against the stream', and in that way brought us all here in his wake. Well, there are grains of truth in all stereotypes, I suppose, and like the Christomonism I applied earlier, here too I think there are aspects of truth in the dogmatic Prometheus, that 'bell-ringer who awakened a generation.' But aspects only.

Barth's theology of human communion, his stirring evocation of mutuality in the Trinity, and his own life of collaboration and intimacy belies my early conviction. Barth worked with and for others. He found it possible to go on, to keep on, because he had helpers—Thurneysen, von Kirschbaum, had conversation partners in his opponents and comrades, had a theological world in university and Church that welcomed his long, dense, elliptical lectures in those early years, and the longer, denser, richer *Church Dogmatics* in the later. Theology is not done alone. Even for doctors of the Church, even for the ascetic heroes of the desert or the anchorites in medieval cells: none works alone. There must be a theological world,

knit up of friends, allies, opponents, and the faithful, who show us how to go on, how to hear the Word of God afresh each day, how to apply our hearts to wisdom.

And that is true not just for Barth's day, but for our own as well. I have come to see just how vital conferences like our own are for the work of theology. I am grateful to be asked to speak here—grateful to the organizers, the Church officers, to all the pastors and scholars who have come here today—and am thankful that the speakers in this conference over the years have become my friends and teachers. I did not realize when I first started academic work how much all this would mean to me; but I am coming to see things once again more clearly than before. But I mean more than that too. As I began writing theology myself, I have come to prize and respect the collective nature of dogmatic work. It's not that theologians need co-authors; and it's not that I think I must find a school to join in order to write theology. Rather I believe that theology must be written in a thought-world, a community, a practice in which the skills, ideals and beauties of theology can be learned for their own sake. And there is less of this than there should be for a vital Church theology, far less than existed when Barth began his work.

To be sure, theology is being written at a steady pace; systematic theology as well. But so often—far too often, I think—theology is undertaken not for its own sake but for another. Theology is taken as reflection of, or contribution to politics, or method, or the humane sciences, or cultural systems; not theology simply as ordered reflection on the gracious Word of God. I don't mean to imply that these other forms should not exist; of course they are important to the task of theology! But doctrine needs to be studied, learned, debated and prized on its own terms, for its own sake, with its own themes and tasks always in view. That is what a theological world is—a place where the language, tradition and rigor of theology is known and prized—and without it, no vital Church theology can be written. I believe that conferences like ours are a branch of this living theological world; and I am deeply grateful for it.

Now it is in light of all these things that I turn to Barth's tribute to Abel Burckhardt, the author of Barth's childhood Bible hymns. Barth, as you may recall, inserted this moving reflection on Burckhardt in the midst of some careful and complex exposition of the Christological basis of sanctification in volume IV, part 2, focusing not on Christ's person but on his work, or better on the unity of his personal work. In it, Barth sketches out the significance of this Swiss pastor in terms strongly reminiscent of my early notion of Barth: simple, straightforward, 'naïve'—the "poet of

theologians” as a critic once labelled Barth. Here is Barth’s gentle and disarming tribute:

I must interpose at this point a small but sincerely grateful tribute. It is to a theologian who cannot be called great, but to whom I am greatly indebted. I refer to Abel Burckhardt, who a hundred years ago—a contemporary of the more famous Jacob Burckhardt—was the second pastor at the minster here in Basel. He composed and edited a collection of songs for children in the local dialect. This was the textbook in which, at the beginning of the last decade of the last century, I received my first theological instruction in a form appropriate to my then immaturity. And what made an indelible impression of me was the homely naturalness with which these very modest compositions spoke of the events of Christmas, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter, the Ascension and Pentecost as things which might take place any day in Basel or its environs like any other important happenings. History? Doctrine? Dogma? Myth? No—but things actually taking place, so that we could see and hear and lay up in our hearts. For as these songs were sung in the everyday language we were then beginning to hear and speak, and as we joined in singing, we took our mother’s hand, as it were, and went to the stall at Bethlehem, and to the streets of Jerusalem where, greeted by children of a similar age, the Saviour made his entry, and to the dark hill of Golgotha, and as the sun rose to the garden of Joseph. Was this representation, like the unbloody repetition of the sacrifice of Christ in the Roman doctrine of the Mass? Was it the kind of faith which in that rather convulsive doctrine is supposed to consist in a re-enactment of the crucifixion of Christ in our own existence? Again, no. It was all present without needing to be made present. They yawning chasm of Lessing did not exist. The contemporaneity of Kierkegaard was not a problem. The Savior himself was obviously the same yesterday and today. All very naïve, but not worth mentioning at all in academic circles? Yes, it was very naïve, but perhaps in the very naivety there lay the deepest wisdom and greatest power, so that once grasped it was calculated to carry one relatively unscathed—although not of course untempted or unassailed—through all the serried ranks of historicism, and anti historicism, mysticism and rationalism, orthodoxy, liberalism and existentialism, and to bring one back some day to the matter itself. (112,113)

Now, just what is going on here? What could it mean for Christ to be present without having to be

made present? Isn’t that just what Barth is accused of trying to do, rushing headlong past the thickets of subjectivity, the strictures of anti-foundationalism, the nuances of historical criticism, the uncertainties and ideologies of all things modern? Isn’t the whole long fourth volume of the *Church Dogmatics* simply one extended tribute to this sovereign power of the Spirit of Christ, to be present in his personal work, simply present, without having to be made present? Isn’t that the very problem—trying to take us post-moderns by the hand, by our mothers or anyone else’s, and leading us anywhere? Yes, I would answer to all these questions; yes, exactly that. Barth is laying out his depiction of the earthly Jesus, the Royal man, with what I would call a bold, stark and unrepentant realism; and that in turn on a bolder, and starker ontological realism about Christ’s ‘homecoming,’ his resurrection from the dead. I would like to spend some time this evening with just these claims of Barth’s: that the exalted Son of Man is present here, in our time and place; and that in the power of his resurrection, he is our present Lord, and we are his present people. Let’s begin by seeing how Barth lays out the skeleton of what is sometimes called the ‘historical Jesus’ in his summary of Burckhardt’s children’s hymns.

Remember that Barth sums up Burckhardt’s songs as relating *events*—a vital category in Barth’s theology—that are celebrated in the festivals of the Christian year, Christmas, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter, the Ascension and Pentecost. More importantly, these events were celebrated in song as those “which might take place any day in Basel or its environs”; that is, they took place there, but they can also take place here and now. The Church calendar is not simply a recalling of an event once past, like the anniversary of a peace treaty, say, or the founding of a college. Rather these festival days mark Christ’s life, present and unfolding now, working now among us to command and reconcile. The events of Christ’s life function in such a way that they are both objective and subjective or, perhaps, external and internal: “we could see and hear them,” Barth writes, “and lay them up in our hearts.” They are impressed upon the singers as they join one another in song, those small, high voices, sometimes following along boldly, sometimes forgetting, half mouthing the words, but somehow joining in, joining along. And they are led. This act Barth praises is neither solitary nor rudderless: the children are taken in song by their mother’s hand on a pilgrimage, a movement Barth will later call the journey of the Son of God into the Far Country and, in our volume, the Homecoming of the Son of Man.

On this pilgrimage, the children turn to the “matter itself”—a slogan from Barth’s student days during the Kant revival—and visit places where the great work of Christ took place: a stall in Bethlehem,

streets in Jerusalem, a dark hill on Golgotha, and a garden at sunrise. We have here, in short, an example of what critics Hans Frei and Eric Auerbach called the 'mixed genre': a narrated history that quietly, and without preamble, mixed together high and low styles, the classical and popular art forms. This mixed genre appears true of Burckhardt's songs—they artlessly combine the great architecture of classical Christianity with the 'homey naturalness' of children being brought to see great sights and wonders. And like a Burckhardt of a 'higher order,' Barth himself draws together here a tribute to this Swiss pastor—an autobiographical story—with some compressed and heady conceptual analyses of Lessing, Kierkegaard, Tridentine eucharistic theology, and the *imitatio Christi*. Now it is not incidental but rather crucial to Barth's whole dogmatic program that he make use of the 'mixed genre.' It is, on a formal level, what Barth holds is taking place, even now, even here, in the Church in Basel and its environs, and in Minneapolis and St. Paul, and in all our home Churches and pulpits. Without preamble, without the 'serried ranks' of method and anti-method, without the long, tormented nuances of idealism or subjectivism—yet not *against them either*—Christ strides into our view, demonstrating his Lordship over this and over all thought, not subjected to them, but rather Subject over them, free to pass in and out among them as their origin and end. This spiritual Lordship is what it means for Christ to be present without having to be made present, and we might well pause here for a moment to see just how Barth's insight works.

Notice how concrete Barth's language is. Barth sums up the narrative of Christ's life as presented in his childhood hymnal through concrete images: a stall in Bethlehem, a street in Jerusalem, a hall outside its walls, a garden, quiet and set aside for those mourners many Sunday mornings ago. He is drawing word-pictures for us, images, Barth tells us, that are far more edifying, far more fitting than the icons, statues, or frescoes that decorated Churches for centuries. But these are particular kinds of word-images. They paint before our eyes a backdrop or scene where a drama will unfold, and where we may ponder and lay up in our hearts those events after they have come to a rest. It is an intriguing fact, I think—but a story for another day—that the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola are built up on word-pictures of just this kind. Notice that Barth is setting a stage, and he is taking us by the hand to look with him at the scenery and to wait with him for the drama soon to unfold. But we would not quite catch Barth's meaning, I think, were we to understand him as suggesting that Christians are *spectators*, an audience to a drama; nor that we are watching something like *historical fiction*—even if narrative or history-like! Rather Barth is illustrating with economy and flair the

landmarks and monuments where great things took place. 'Important happenings' he calls them, and likens them to any others that might happen in our proud modern nation-states. Barth quietly assumes here that he is naming historical events, things that have taken place. The stalls in Bethlehem, that is, are not place holders for a *concept* or doctrine—a familiar and popular way of saying "incarnation"—but are rather the names for the backdrop against which Christ came among us. They point to and accompany the great events and history of God with us. Now it is claims of just this sort that raise the specter of Lessing and Kierkegaard, the problems of historicism and fideism, and make the hairs on the back of seminarians' and scholars' necks stand straight on end. How can Barth or any theologian so calmly assume and rely upon the historical accuracy of the New Testament? How can he or we just take these Biblical events, from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, at face value, without comment, warrant or criticism, and simply lay them to heart? Isn't this just what we mean by fideism, by credulousness, and by naivete in the matters of faith? Just what kind of history are we speaking about here; and just what kind of faith?

We can say some things that Barth does not mean in reply to these vital questions. He does not mean that we Christians are to take the Bible as historically true through a mighty and sheer dint of will. He does not believe we are to simply blind ourselves to doubts about historical events, to close our eyes and ears to the current and critical work of historians about the Second Temple era, nor to simply wish all this away, at times with cheerfulness, at times with sorrow or fierce protectiveness. Indeed, Barth took the historical criticism of his era with real seriousness, and, as we will see, used it not only peripherally but materially in his doctrine of the Royal man, the historical Jesus. Nor does he mean that we are simply to bolt the door—to speak in Barth's idiom for a moment—from the inside and declare all historical questions out of court. True enough, the Bible is the Church's book; true enough, it is within the Church that these ancient texts from late Antiquity are learned, marked, and inwardly digested, to form persons in Christ. But Barth did not conclude from all this that the Bible should be a community text only, and closed to public examination, study and debate. Nor did he conclude that the modern canons of scholarly research cannot apply to Scripture, and that our Christian claims are suddenly and magisterially exempt from broad, rational standards of coherence, validity, or adequacy. Barth did not consider Christians a species of those who believe six impossible things before breakfast. Nor did he consider the authority, unity, and power of Scripture to override or annihilate the contradictions, variants, or mistakes of the Bible record. No, like Abel Burckhardt, Barth himself is after something of

“deeper wisdom and great power,” something more profound, more historical, more concrete than any of these questions, doubts, worries, and debates. He is after the “subject-matter itself.”

Now the subject-matter of Christian faith, profession, and proclamation is Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man, the Lord of history, and the historical Lord, the historical Jesus. Now you might have agreed with me readily on these predicates of Christ up until the end of the list. But you might have stumbled at the ending. You might now be wondering: could Barth—or we—believe that the subject matter of Christian proclamation actually is the historical Jesus? Isn't it this very claim that led to that sad episode that lingers into our own day, the “quest for the historical Jesus?” Haven't we learned already from Albert Schweitzer that those biographers of the earthly Jesus saw only their own face as they stared into the well of history? Isn't that the very lesson that the young Barth took away from his years at the school of Protestant liberalism? Yes, certainly, to all these questions. And yet I believe we must still say that Barth holds to the centrality of Jesus as a figure in history, an event in world-occurrence, as Barth might put this, and a human life known and studied through the tools of historical research. Even stronger: Barth, I believe, would urge upon us the claim that Jesus Christ *is* history, and that the revelation of his Person *is* history, and that the truest, fullest and most fitting description of the Incarnate Lord is not nature, or being, but rather *act*, that is, *history*. The movement from here to there, from beginning to end, from youth to maturity—the very building blocks of a human life, its shape and goal—all belong to Jesus Christ, and belong to him eminently. He is truly human, Barth says, and by this he means something rather more weighty than do the older dogmatists. Jesus Christ is the exemplar of the human, the truest, fullest, obedient human; he alone and first among all his kind is an historical agent. He is the true historical person, and without the historical Jesus there is no Savior but rather concept, myth, hypothesis, and dream. “Historical consciousness,” a quality so beloved of the great Protestant modernists, is hardly shunned by Barth, even in his most metaphysical turns of mind. He is, rather, *the* great historical thinker among modern theologians, and we will not enter far into his thought if we do not grasp how the category and claim of history invades everything Barth holds. When Barth praises Burckhardt for acknowledging that Christ is present without having to be made present, he does not mean to praise Burckhardt for severing Christ from history or making him invulnerable to the historian's cold and objectivizing gaze. Rather the opposite: Christ is present without our aid *because* he is historical, because his life has, as part of its Lordship, also a

place in the past, a history and a biography in which it can be written: this took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

The ‘historical Jesus’ and all the problems this phrase connotes has now stormed into view, and we must step carefully here. Carefully: because anyone who has studied the history of modern Protestant theology, and anyone who has followed even at a great distance and with great reserve, the course of current debate about earliest Christianity raised by members of the Jesus Seminar, knows that we have entered deep waters. How can we follow Barth in his confidence that Jesus Christ is Lord not only of but in history, and escape the uncertainties, bafflements, and corrosions of historical research into the life of Jesus? Are we not exactly in the neighborhood that Barth believed Burckhardt had fled—the narrow streets that led directly and inescapably to the dead-end Lessing called the “contingent truths of history?” I think all this depends on just how we phrase the problem. It is exceedingly difficult in such troubled and deep waters to get our footing right; and it makes all the difference to our being delivered from them. We have to state carefully here just what our dilemma is, and just what a solution might look like.

Here is one way we might phrase the problem: how can we retrieve a usable history about Jesus for the Church today? And another: how can we be certain that the history depicted in Scripture is correct? And finally: how can we make that history alive and vital to those seeking Christ today, and not surrender it to the dusty disputes of the academic's study? Now these are all familiar questions to pastors and scholars of theology, I'm sure; and we have all suffered through many dense and ambitious essays and even more ambitious sermons predicated on just these questions. But if we listen to Barth, this form of the problem will be seen, I believe, to be what philosophers call a “non-starter.” We can never run the appointed race on a horse of this description. Barth believes that we will never be able to face the problems of the historical Jesus Christ if we begin with any act we call “retrieval.” The reliance upon this framework—the retrieval of a usable past—is so widespread, and has such profound effects, that we must reflect a moment or two on the significance of such a background picture. Consider the very act and aim of retrieval, and the retrievers themselves.

Notice that as retrievers, we stand now along the edges of a great divide. Our task, as retrievers, is to cast something from our side into the vast expanse between our side and the other, and on reaching that distant past, draw back toward us that object that can now stand on our side, and take its part in our world. We assume that there are objects over there on that distant shore; we share with others the conviction

that something that lingers there would be worth bringing here on the near side; and hold out hope—perhaps even confidence—that we can carry out this rescue. But we recognize that it will be an effort. It is no small thing, after all, to cross a divide. No small thing to find an object separated from us by a great expanse. And no small thing to make that object come alive in the midst of our world, our objects, our conventions and rules. Yet we consider it worthy of our efforts; indeed we may believe that our own side suffers from its sorry distance from that other shore, and hope the retrieval will bind up, in part, in time, our side to that side beyond the divide. But a divide it remains, all the same; and a retriever must act, and act boldly to cross it.

Just so might we picture the effort to retrieve a usable Jesus from the history of 1st century Judea. A century and a half ago, Ludwig Feuerbach described the conditions of retrieval with unmatched clarity:

In my works I have sketched, with a few sharp touches, the historical solution of Christianity, and have shown that Christianity has in fact long vanished, not only from the reason but from the life of mankind, that it is nothing more than a *fixed idea*, in flagrant contradiction with our fire and life assurance companies, our railroads and steam-carriages, our picture and sculpture galleries, our military and industrial schools, our theatres and scientific museums. (xlv, *Essence of Christianity*)

Feuerbach assures us that we know just what it is to be a modern subject, a citizen of a modern society. We know the rules and conventions of something we call the “scientific or modern world view:” we stand on the near shore where electric lights burn day and night; where trains and trucks hurtle past with goods, ever more goods for an insatiable market; where supply and demand are the fixed limits of realism; where schools are institutions training the young for these limits; and where the nations and peoples who cannot stand on this modern shore are pitilessly swept aside. As those who might seek to retrieve a usable past, we share the background picture Feuerbach sketches out with such bold strokes. We wonder how to make a 1st century Galilean Jew relevant to such a post-industrial world. It is of course a *presupposition* of such a view that the 1st century Jesus *does not* fit in our world, and that he is alien to our time and place. It is a *presupposition* of this view that our world is alien, hostile and invulnerable to the history of Jesus and his world of Second Temple Judaism and its Roman masters. The very task of making Jesus Christ relevant to our day *assumes*—it need never be stated—that Christ is not, in fact and by nature, relevant to our day, not at home in our world, not master of our day. Jesus Christ must be made useful; he must be

joined to another task and goal—politics, ethics, health—to show a membership in our world. Like theology itself, we assume today that Jesus cannot stand on his own, cannot speak with his own authority, and act on his own power, but must serve another. For ours is a secular, godless world, we say in this background picture, an autonomous, bruising, self-mastering world to which the traditional society of peasants, fishermen, servant girls, and wonder-workers simply finds no home. We look into our world much as Cardinal Newman looked into his: a cold, heartless hive of busy and self important strivers who cannot hear or speak of a religious word, and who make a religious believer, in turn, feel like someone who looks into a mirror and cannot see her own reflection. How can the word of Christ be preached in such an alien land? This is the lament of all those who seek to retrieve Christ from an alien past and make him present to an indifferent world.

We seek analogies, parallels, translations that make his presence felt today. We wonder what we might make of the details of this distant past. Might Jesus have been a revolutionary, a political activist? Might he have been a healer, a spiritual director and guide? Might he have actually said, Blessed are the poor? Might his call to serve and to suffer be found stirring still to those caught up in empty and busy lives? Might women find even in this unlikely place a practice of liberation that could be made vital and dynamic today? We hope that an analogy of this Biblical past might be applied today: on that distant shore stood fishermen and tax collectors; on our shore, workers and the steadily increasing bureaucrats. Or: in that 1st century culture, Pharisees, High Priests, and Sadducees; today, we have religious leaders, clergy and prelates with smug moral superiority and blindness to real religious depth and power. Then, those possessed by demons; now, the mentally ill; then, disciples frightened by menacing storms; now, Christians afflicted with anxieties and doubts. Always in these analogies we seek to move from the past into a familiar present, and to translate those elements of the past into an idiom of the present that will carry us over the divide and make the past open to us once again.

All of us, I imagine, have heard sermons and read essays of this kind; we have no doubt written them too. This is a nearly irresistible practice for us, as it rests on a framing of the historical past that we find irresistible, even as we strive to overcome it. And, like the shop-worn generalities I mentioned earlier, there is a grain of truth here too. For we do live in a world Christians rightly call Fallen. We *are* sinners; we are hostile to God’s reign; we do not wish, as Anselm said rightly long ago, to have a master. Ours is a culture that preens itself on achievement, and passes the poor, the desperate, the broken by on the other side,

hoping to avoid the contagion of failure in the success society. We are the proud who cannot have a servant as our Lord; we are the blind who cannot have the True Witness attest for us; we are the indolent who mask our sloth as busyness and cannot follow the direction of the Royal servant. All our glittering possessions, all our clever and sleek distractions, all our great adulations of princes, horse and chariot, our massive towers, bulwarks, palaces: all of these are burnished sepulchers, burial places for a world that will not know its Maker and Redeemer. This is the world we all live and work in; it is our home, and we are citizens of it. We must write and study theology, hear and preach sermons to the citizens of such a world, and we must find words to use to a world that is perishing, to citizens whose lives and glories are lost and passing away. This is not done easily—indeed this is properly not our work at all, but rather the act only of the One Royal Word of God—yet in another sense, this task of speaking to our generation is the easiest of all. For we too are citizens of this world, we too are those passing away, and when we listen, study and write of the Fallen world, we speak of what we know, first-hand and from the inside. If we find our world dizzying and repellant, as Cardinal Newman did, or godless and mean and cheese-paring, as Feuerbach did, we know that this is a world that finds Christ unwelcome and useless, a danger to the piety and conventions of this age. So the grain of truth in the act of retrieval is the recognition that in our world, as in all worlds and ages past, there is no room for Christ to be born or to have supper with his friends, or to abide. In our world, as in all worlds and ages past, the worldly may find no wrong in him, yet find it convenient still to rid themselves of him and return to the powers they know. In our world, as in all worlds, we are sinners and Christ is our judge; and a fallen world has no place for a Just Judge.

Yet this element of truth in the search to retrieve a usable past does not mean that we have properly grasped the problem of the historical Jesus. We are still attempting, in all our reaching for analogies, translations, and applications, to make Christ present, to snatch him from a silent and dead past and prop him up here in our modern and alien present. This is a task mortals cannot do, and those of us who have attempted it, or watched others try, know how dismal the entire operation can be. We try so hard, yet Jesus seem so remote, so unapproachable, so unknowable and sealed up in the past. If we are schooled by Barth, we will recognize why: Christ cannot be *made present*. This is the wrong way to frame the problem of the historical Jesus, the wrong way to acknowledge his place in history, and the history in him. We should rather, Barth counsels, frame the question this way: how is the presence of the historical Jesus known in our world? Or, perhaps

better: how do the events of Jesus' earthly Lordship happen in our day too? Or better still: how do I acknowledge what Christ himself attests: that he is Lord even of his own history, then and now? Let us see now how Barth's framing of the problem of the historical Jesus shapes our view.

In a minor aside in his magisterial treatment of the doctrine of sanctification, Barth comments on the nature of historical knowledge and its relation to Christian faith. Like many of these asides buried within longer doctrinal expositions, this paragraph deceives: it appears to offer a minor addition to the broader theme—an obiter dictum—when in fact it goes to the very heart of Barth's position, and is crucial to our understanding. Indeed in this way, it is not far from Barth's tribute to Abel Burckhardt himself. This aside with great compression asserts that historical knowledge of Jesus Christ has two movements or bases: it is properly and most fully a loving and self-involving praise of Christ as Redeemer; but it is *also*—not fundamentally or primarily, but really and additionally—objective, neutral knowledge of the past. Barth gives a nod to the Kantian distinctions Ritschlians used with relish: knowledge of Christ is a value-judgment, certainly; but it is also, as a preparation and introduction, a judgment of fact as well. "Love" Barth writes "does not know neutrally and with complete objectivity. But neutral and objective—'historical'—knowledge is its presupposition." (IV/2; p.149) To love truly, Barth argues, we must know truly: we must have justified, true belief of the existence, contour, and aim of the beloved. Doesn't sound like the Barth we have been taught, does it? But this aside reveals a position of real depth in Barth. Jesus of Nazareth, the Royal Son of Man, has a history, a genuine and sturdy objectivity, as do all other creatures; and like any other reality, it can and should be known with the detachment, attention, and thoroughness we accord to all our acts of knowledge. Jesus Christ has this kind of past. He belongs to it, and he shares it. His objectivity is genuine, and we can trust it, investigate it, study and question it. For this reason, Barth claims, we can and must say that God entered into our world, and came to his own, called to himself sinners and the lost, and truly reconciled the world to himself. Without this historical objectivity, Jesus Christ is no Redeemer but rather only the *idea* of Redemption, the concept of an incarnate God. But this objectivity, so prized by our current generation of historians of Jesus, carries with it, Barth argues, an imperative: we must study with real discipline and care, just what objects are left to us to study—the *texts* of the New Testament. The books and letters, Barth insists, are the historical record; there is no other. Events, imagined and reconstructed *behind* these texts, are not the stuff of history, but rather of speculation and imagination. True historical

objectivity works with what is, what already carries the density of historical evidence, and that is the New Testament. In the records of these first witnesses, from the Apostle Paul to the memories of the disciples and their followers, we receive the real evidence—the real effects—of the real Jesus Christ. He made disciples; he drew men and women to himself; he suffered before them and to them alone revealed his glory. The history of Jesus is the history of his calling others to himself, and that is what these Biblical records attest. The objectivity that faith rightly presupposes must be directed to and impartially investigate this record. Only then will it possess the impartially and concreteness historical knowledge demands. And Barth made ample use of just this kind of textual, historical study. The *Church Dogmatics* brims over with artifacts from the higher criticism of Barth's generation: the focused attention on Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God; the conviction that the Gospels are passion narratives writ large; the recognition that the Pharisees were the reforming and liberal class among 1st century Jews; and above all, that the resurrection stands at the foundation of all historical witness to Jesus Christ. All this historical work, however, serves as introduction to the true knowledge and praise of Jesus Christ, the Lord of history. And in this faithful praise we find Barth's final and deepest reflection on the historicity of the Royal Man.

"Jesus Christ is Lord": that is the earliest and truest acknowledgement of the historical Jesus. Now, for Barth, Christ's Lordship is the fundamental fact about the Son of God; indeed the fundamental fact about our very world and all the creatures in it. Christ's Lordship is not simply a title among others, not simply a relic of the past that may be retrieved by some clever wordsmith, and decidedly not a courtesy title to One central to our lives. Lordship, rather, is the full, proper, and objective description of Jesus Christ. He is Lord as no one else is, certainly not the poor pompous tyrants we recognize in our market place and throneroom as lords. And he is Lord over all creation. Now Barth does not mean that in a limited or weak sense. Christ is not simply the leader and commanding servant of Christians; not simply the unrecognized Lord of all his brothers and sisters. He is that, to be sure; but Barth means more. Christ's Lordship is his very fabric and act, so that everything that touches him and, even more, everything that expresses and is related to him is subject to his command. Really everything. Christ's very objectivity—his presence among us as the Risen One—remains under his sovereignty. We do not command him to be here with us; he commands us, permits and enables us, to be here with him. He does not require our acts of retrieval to bring him here; he manifests himself, the Living One, as Lord of our day and place. He can be

studied, examined, questioned, doubted, and compared; he permits that. But he *permits* it; he does not suffer it but rather graciously allows his own life to have this steady, reliable, historical objectivity. Even more, Christ is Lord over his own past.

Unlike all other creatures, Jesus Christ enters into history and emerges from it its sovereign Lord. His crucifixion as a criminal, hung between sinners, is not his defeat but rather his victory. He came for that purpose—as Lord to become this servant unto death—and he accomplished it. But in his resurrection, Christ reveals his humanity, his servanthood, in its Lordship, its Royal reconciliation of sinners to God. Now such a Lord is not servant to time. He does not have to obey the inexorable laws under which we lost creatures must buckle. He need not enter into the dead, the forgotten, the lost and past. He does this; but he does it in sovereign freedom. Christ lays down his life; and he takes it up again. Christ comes from the dead—Barth concludes his discussion of Christ's resurrection with a stirring hymn to just this act of bursting forth from death—and declares in that way his own truth, his own victory over all that is dead and past. Unlike any other creature, Christ possesses and rules his past. He is present now—and we live by that fact—but Christ's presence is more than that. Christ is our present Lord in his history: he is the commanding presence of his own past. As the historical Jesus he is our Risen Lord. In his rule, he is his past, unfolded now among us. He alone can make his past present here and in that way demonstrate both his objectivity—his 'pastness'—and his Subjectivity, his Lordship. The problem of the historical Jesus is solved only by Christ himself. He alone opens this locked door, and his Spirit, he is among us as the One he was.

This is Abel Burckhardt's insight, embedded quietly, perhaps unwittingly, in his children's hymnal a century ago: Christ is present here in the stall of Bethlehem, in the dusty roads of the Galilee, the crowded, indifferent streets of the great capital Jerusalem, in the gardens, roadsides, and lonely rooms of the mourning disciples—here in just these historical ways—not as we recall him, but as he attests himself—a present Lord without having to be made present.

Toronto conference being planned for Fall 2002

Planning is underway for a Barth conference to be held in Toronto in October 2002 to mark the 70th anniversary of the publication of the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics* (I/1), which appeared in 1932. Though the conference is being planned primarily with the needs of scholarly pastors in mind, interested academics and laypeople would also be welcome, according to David Demson (Emmanuel College, Toronto).